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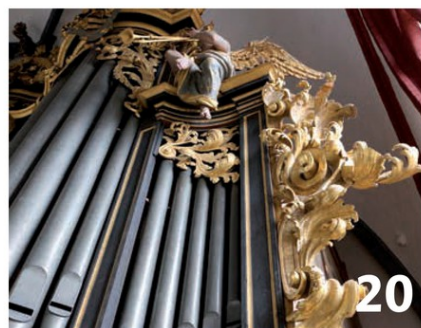
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Fall from grace

What prompted a former rock star to compose an oratorio on the central theme of Milton's *Paradise Lost*? **David Wordsworth** meets The Police drummer Stewart Copeland



WIKIPEDIA

The American composer Stewart Copeland is a man of many parts. He rose to prominence as the drummer of The Police, the British rock band with the historic line-up of Sting, Andy Summers and Copeland who became a global sensation during the 1970s/80s. Although the band disbanded in 1986, they reunited during the 2000s for a world tour, and continue to be a defining and important force in rock music.

When reducing his commitment to the band in the mid-1980s, Stewart Copeland returned to his 'classical roots', writing a number of acclaimed film scores, music for video games, and works for the concert hall and opera house. However, aside from a short work for children's chorus, choral music has not yet appeared in the composer's catalogue. This has now changed with the composition of a major work, *Satan's Fall*, setting part of John Milton's epic 17th-century blank verse poem *Paradise Lost*. Jointly commissioned by the Mendelssohn Choir of Pittsburgh (music director, Matthew Mehaffey) and VocalEssence, Minnesota (music director, Philip Brunelle), along with several other organisations, the work was premiered in Pittsburgh, in February 2020. The global pandemic delayed other regional premieres, but fervent champions of new music VocalEssence will give their performance on 8 May this year.

Why *Paradise Lost*? The composer explains: "That was simply a result of studying A level English Literature at a British boarding school in the late 60s. We studied the poem, mercifully not the whole thing, but it always stayed with me – the power of the language and Milton saying that he was trying to "explain the ways of God to Man". Copeland sets Books 5 and 6 of *Paradise Lost*, which deal specifically with Satan's darkness,

◀ 1866 illustration by Gustave Doré for Milton's *Paradise Lost*

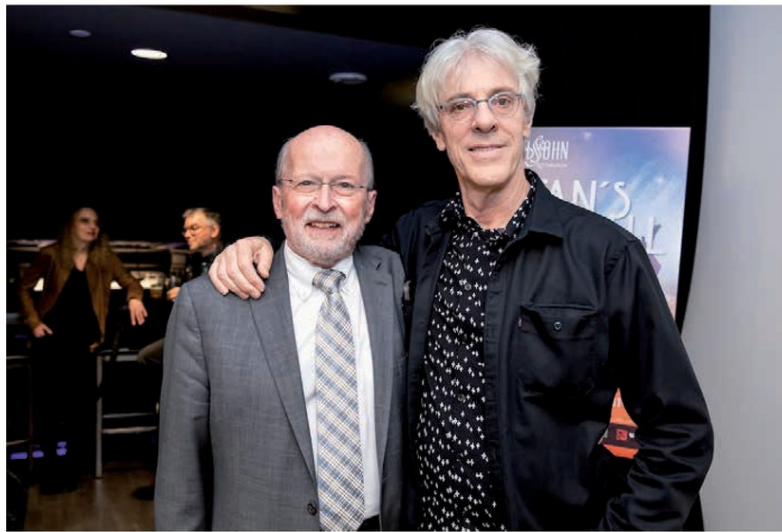
► VocalEssence director Philip Brunelle, who describes composer Stewart Copeland (r) as 'a consummate musician'

◀ Early tension and drama in the score of *Satan's Fall*

insurrection, and fall from grace. He goes on to say: 'There is a story within the story. It concerns the essential prequel to the sacred tale: why did Satan do it? How and why does Almighty God have an adversary? We get an answer when we learn of Satan's journey to the "dark side" and of the mighty battle that cast him out of heaven. Such a story must be told by a heavenly choir!' The text, as anyone with a passing acquaintance with Milton's poem will know, is rich in imagery, but something of a challenge to set to music. According to Copeland, 'the poem clearly has an internal rhythm, but I decided to take out many of the similes, which work when reading but would get in the way of a musical setting. I move the verb to a recognisable place too, rather than at the end of lines which is what Milton does – again, fine for reading in an armchair, but not great for music.'

The first ideas and original commission for *Satan's Fall* date back to the early 2000s, but the project didn't develop, and the sketches were put away in a drawer until an invitation arrived to write a new work for the Mendelssohn Choir. Although Copeland has composed several successful operas, he admits, 'I have had no real association with the choral world, although I have always admired the sound of a great choir. The chance to contribute to that particular genre just didn't come my way – I suppose people just didn't think to ask me! I love working with orchestras, but it is the singularity of purpose when it comes to a choir that is so inspiring. Most of the singers in these choirs have "day jobs" – I think this is the case with a lot of choirs in the UK too – but they all come together to do this remarkable thing. Amazing, really.'

The orchestra for *Satan's Fall* is, perhaps surprisingly, not so large – a sort of 'rock orchestra', with a modest number of winds, brass, and strings, with prominent percussion – 'so no surprises there,' the composer adds. 'I use the orchestra as a sort of cushion for the singers, though it turned out to be quite spikey and dramatic in its own right.' Copeland cites hearing Carl Orff's *Carmina Burana* as a boy as being a major influence on ►



COURTESY PHILIP BRUNELLE

Vocal Score

26

God / Behial He who dis-o-beys Him Dis-o-beys Me.

Angels He who dis-o-beys Him Dis-o-beys Me.

Henchmen He who dis-o-beys Him Dis-o-beys Me.

Rehearsal Piano

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God / Behial He who dis-o-beys Him

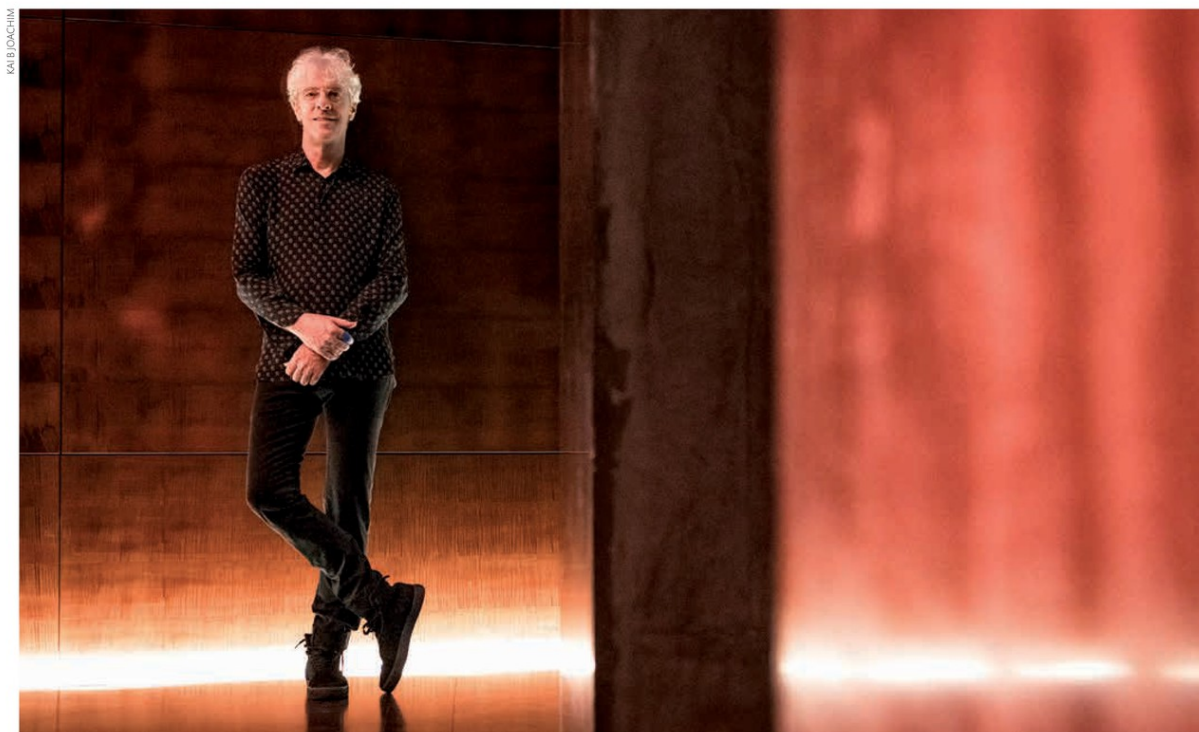
Angels He who dis-o-beys Him

Henchmen He who dis-o-beys Him

Rehearsal Piano

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SATAN'S FALL



▲ Stewart Copeland: 'The singularity of purpose [in a choir] is so inspiring'

◀ him; later, Stravinsky's *Symphony of Psalms* made a deep impression, and the work of his close namesake Aaron Copland, particularly the Copland of *Rodeo* and *Appalachian Spring*, as well as French masters Debussy and Ravel, whose scores are always close at hand. As far as more recent composers are concerned, Copeland enthuses about the work of Steve Reich, Phillip Glass, Julia Wolfe, Caroline Shaw, and John Adams – composers, he says, 'who went back to writing music that people actually wanted to hear and moved away from alienating their audiences.' With this in mind, does Copeland think his music sounds particularly American? 'I'm not sure – someone else would have a better idea. I think my tempi are pretty constant, maybe this is an "American thing"; the basic rhythmic structure is relatively simple, the details that are in and around that structure can be complex, but not overtly so – once people get into it, these details tend to fall into place.'

VocalEssence are hardly strangers to new music. In the more than 50 years of its existence, the choir – or to be more accurate, the four choirs that make up the organisation – have collectively premiered over 300 works,

large and small, by composers from all over the world. I point out to Philip Brunelle that the slight difference here was that, as far as Stewart Copeland was concerned, he would perhaps have had less idea of what he would get? 'This is very true; the vast majority of the composers we have commissioned I have known or worked with, or at least I knew that they had a track record as far as choral music was concerned. With Stewart it was slightly different, but it wasn't as though I was starting from nothing: I knew he was a consummate musician, and welcomed the chance to go on this adventure. I did love the idea of *Paradise Lost* too, and realised that I hadn't read it, so I sat down and did just that – well, most of it...

'I would probably call [*Satan's Fall*] an oratorio. It is very dramatic, even visceral in its effect. If I describe the music as being very filmic, I don't want to dumb it down in any way – it is a very sophisticated piece of work. I would go so far as to say that the piece is operatic: the chorus certainly have an operatic, almost Greek chorus sort of role, responding and commenting on the story as it proceeds. We have been thinking about a sort of semi-staging, having the soloists, who

represent the Messiah, Raphael, Satan and others, spread out a little for dramatic effect, not just in a line in front of the orchestra as they usually are – though, of course, it would be perfectly possible to perform the piece that way too. There is also a striking part for a pipe organ, so it is a piece that benefits from being sung in a church. The choral writing is idiomatic, but not so easy: it requires a lot of stamina and energy, and a big range, particularly from the sopranos, who go up to a high C. But I would say that it would be possible to do the piece with a good community chorus.'

After his first experience of writing for a choir, is Stewart Copeland planning to return to choral music? 'I would certainly like to explore this new world – I'm even thinking that it might be possible to make *Satan's Fall* into a full evening piece; we will see...' ■

David Wordsworth is a freelance choral conductor and workshop leader, and music director of the Addison Singers. His book Giving Voice to My Music, interviews with choral composers, was published by Kahn and Averill in August 2021.